

REHEARSING THE PIT

This chapter was written for the instructor and contains advice for running effective rehearsals and performing consistent shows.

Warm-up Concepts

The technical warm-up is a crucial part of your pit program. Here you can take the time to develop all aspects of technique and musicianship. The following are some ideas used by the Santa Clara Vanguard to produce effective warm-up sessions.

The Setup

Start by looking at the setup of the instruments. Some pits warm-up in circles or place their keyboards in a tight box shape. This can be effective in certain situations. For example, try having keyboard players pair up, facing each other, to work on interpretation and dynamics. This setup is also good when space is limited. However, it is very important to **duplicate your “show” setup in the warm-up**. Vanguard warm-ups typically include all keyboards and timpani in their normal show setup.

Proper Mallets for Warm-up

The next issue to deal with is getting the proper mallets in the hands of the players. After reading the section on “touch” (page 109) you know that the hardness of a mallet has a big impact on the firmness of the fulcrum. A softer mallet will make you work harder to articulate the notes than a hard mallet. For this reason, many players prefer mallets that are not too hard. On the other hand, you don’t want a mallet that is so soft that all you hear is a “wash” of sound. Here are the mallets (by Innovative Percussion) that the Vanguard pit often uses for workouts: marimba (top) Casella 1003, marimba (bottom) Casella 1002, vibes Casella 1006, xylophone Casella 1007, Ross IP 901, or Ross IP 903, timpani Vic Firth General. Though all of these mallets have medium-hard to hard cores, they all have a soft contact sound on the bar. This is due to the fact that they all have a soft yarn, cord, or felt covering. This takes away much of the harshness and gives them a dark, round sound. Also, notice that all of the xylophone mallets are medium-soft to medium; this prevents the xylophone sound from dominating the ensemble.

The Warm-up Repertoire

Now the big question: what exercises should you play? The time of the season may help you answer that. **During the competitive season**, it is best to dedicate a good chunk of rehearsal time to addressing very specific concepts (working on a specific roll style, or working on accents). Find exercises that will **relate directly to the music** you are playing. Many groups waste rehearsal time working on exercises that will not immediately benefit the musical ensemble. You should also spend time working on building hand strength and stamina (chops). Also, realize that this is the time to make mistakes and learn. Try to avoid a “pressure” or “no-mistakes” atmosphere. Make sure the students are mastering the concepts first; the notes will follow.

During the off-season, spend time touching on *all* aspects of technique and musicianship. This is the time of the season to learn and grow. This is also a great time to learn and perform a variety of percussion ensemble pieces. Also, try to expose your students to different method books, solos, duets, videos of great performances, and cd’s of all types of music (it doesn’t have to just be percussion).

At the Vanguard we have two warm-up scenarios: show and rehearsal. For the **show warm-up**, which is usually about 35-45 minutes, they play 2 or 3 exercises that the group feels very comfortable with. Then they will review show excerpts and music changes. This will build their confidence going into the show and get their “brains engaged.” A typical **rehearsal warm-up** usually lasts for 1-3 hours, time permitting. First, they start with a **simple exercise to get the hands moving**. The following exercises should focus on achieving a full stroke and working on basic musical shaping. They will usually repeat these exercises through all 12 major or minor keys, then move on to a faster tempo.

Singles (page 121)

16th note accent to tap (page 124)

Four mallet arpeggios (page 146)

Once the hands and brains are ready they will move onto some **speed and fluidity exercises**. At this point they’re focusing on relaxation, consistency of sound, playing zones, and subtle shaping. They will usually go through 6 keys (for the exercises that change keys), change tempos, then go through the other 6 keys. This allows them to get to the faster tempos more quickly. They will usually go through 6-7 tempos, getting about 5-10 beats per minute faster each time. Here are some suggested exercises from section 3:

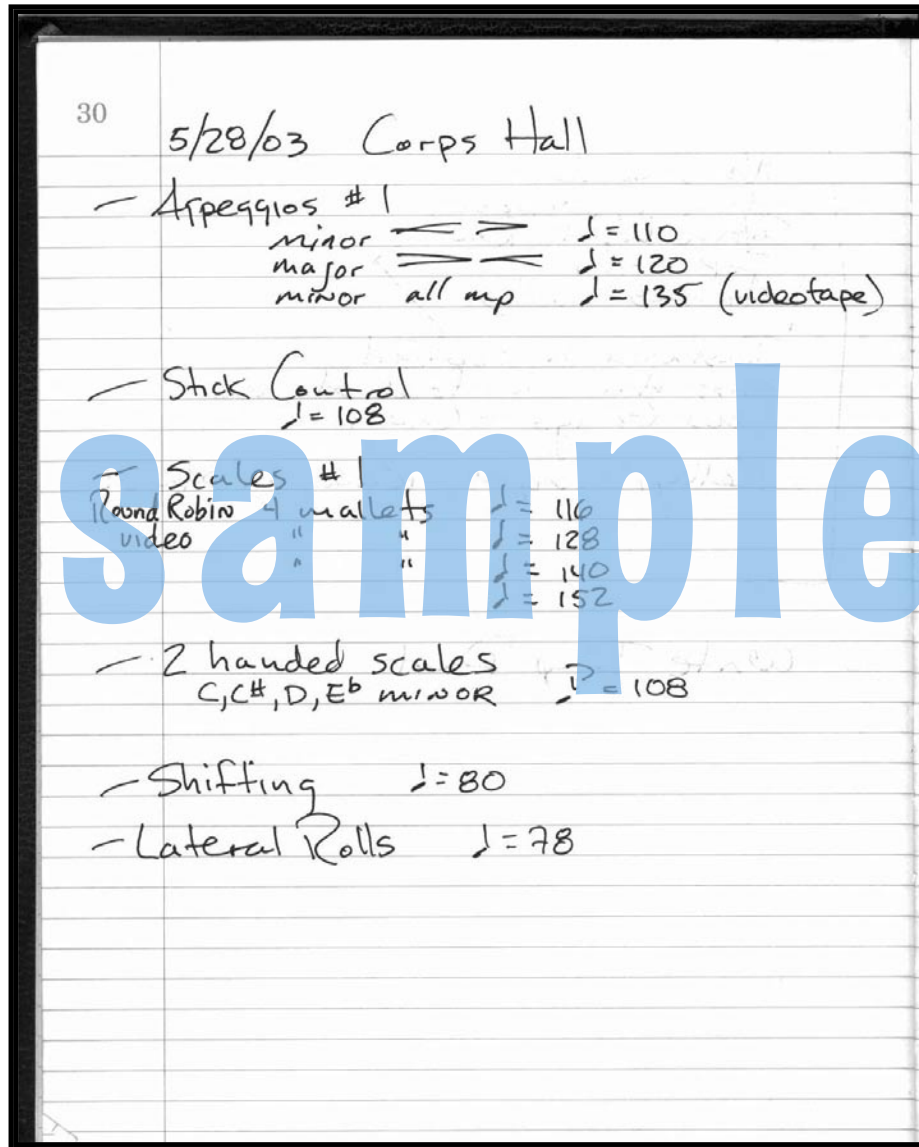
16th Note Scales 1 and 2 (page 122-123)

Yak-scents (page 126)

Stick Control (page 125)

If time permits, we move on to **roll exercises** (lateral rolls, independent rolls) or play through some of our **percussion ensemble literature**. Throughout this whole process, we like to make a few subtle changes to the exercises (new accents, or different shaping) and we'll also make changes to the exercise repertoire every few weeks. This variety keeps the students thinking and it keeps the routine fresh.

It's also a good idea to keep a **journal** in order to track the progress of the ensemble and to see what exercises they've done from day to day.



Example of rehearsal journal, where daily notes can be taken.

Another important idea is to **create new exercises** based on problem spots of the show music. These problems may be related to specific stroke types, note accuracy, rhythm, tempo maintenance, listening, or balance, just to give a few examples. Whatever the issue is, create an exercise that will target that specific spot in its *simplest* form. This strategy is far more effective than repeating the show excerpt over and over again and hoping they get it right!



Jim checks notes and Glen ponders...

Standing in front of the pit

This is where much of your “cleaning” of the pit will happen. This is your chance to listen to the rhythmic clarity and consistency of interpretation from player to player. This is also a good time to check out the balance and blend *within* the pit. Is the xylophone over-balancing the vibe sound? Is the suspended cymbal drowning out that beautiful glockenspiel countermelody? This is the time to fix these issues. Since you’ve already warmed up with the metronome, you know the tendencies of your players. Besides their tendencies with rhythm and tempo,

you also know their tendencies with balance, playing zones, consistency of sound, shaping, and articulation. It will all show up here.

This is also a great time to check other important issues like vibe pedaling, dampening of various instruments, accessory technique, and how well they “perform.” Essentially, these are all of things you would be looking and listening to in a sectional rehearsal (pit alone). The only thing you would do differently in a sectional is that you would spend more time listening to individuals play.

sample



Chris phones in issues to the press box.

Standing behind the pit

If you stand on the front sideline, directly behind the pit, you are in the ultimate “hot spot.” This is a great spot to check timing issues. From this position, you can watch the drum major and check the timing between the field musicians and the pit.

Your first task in this process is to **watch the drum major** and see how well they are holding the tempo. Try to have a metronome to your ear and watch the major’s

pattern. Besides checking for tempo maintenance, you can also check for pattern clarity and check to see where the major’s “focus” is. What section are they watching on the field and trying to keep in time? Which section to focus on will change from phrase to phrase. If the major feels like they are being pushed or pulled by the ensemble, have an instructor go to the back of the field with the metronome and speaker. This can be very revealing!

When the drum major is confident with their tasks you can check the **timing of the field percussion and winds**. On the field, there are many situations that can affect their timing. Here are just a few common problems for the field musicians: slowing down during direction changes in the drill, the battery slowing down during rolls or difficult technical passages, slowing down going into halts, they may be inconsistent with tempo changes, ritards, or accelerandos, or their distance to the front sideline may affect their timing (if they are too close or too far). During this process it is very important to make the pit aware of these tendencies. During a performance they will have to **listen back and adjust** to all of these “issues” coming from the field.

Standing in the Press Box

Standing in the press box or up in the bleachers will provide you with the best opportunity to address overall ensemble issues such as balance, blend, timing, and general effect. Before you head “up top,” spend some time directly behind the pit, as mentioned previously. This will help you to know the timing and tempo tendencies of the entire ensemble. From the press box, you will have a better view to see exactly what is causing these problems; particularly if they are drill related. Experiment with having the pit tacet during some reps. This will highlight the backfield problems and allow you to address them.

More importantly, as a pit instructor, this is your time to balance the front ensemble with the *entire* musical ensemble. You’ll find that there are certain **instruments that often overbalance**. Some of these include: suspended cymbals, tam tams, concert bass drums, xylophones, high metal sounds like crotales, glockenspiels, and bell plates. These problems are usually easily fixed. Simply bring the performer’s dynamic level down or experiment with a softer mallet to see if that takes off some of the “edge.” If this doesn’t do it, perhaps that part is simply too overbearing for the full ensemble score. If this is the case, you may have to “thin-out” or remove the part.

If **parts are under-balanced** and not cutting through, the solution may not be so simple. Again, you may try to bring the dynamic level up or experiment with different mallets. More often, under-balanced parts are a **scoring problem**. Perhaps the part is too fast. This means the part will have to be played low to the keyboard resulting in a low dynamic level. Perhaps the part is scored too thinly. Can it be played in octaves, or voiced with four-mallets, or played in a *different* octave? Sometimes the part may be “uncomfortable” to play. For example, a B major chord (B, D#, F#, B) sounds harmless enough, but simply doesn’t lie well under the hands. Uncomfortable parts can usually be fixed with very simple score edits or new stickings. Another very common problem is **getting vibraphones and chimes to cut** through. The solution to this may be easy: be very *generous* with the pedal. Though leaving the pedal down for an entire phrase may sound awful to the performer, it will sound very full and lush to the audience. Even staccato chords can use a quick pedal to “open” up the sound. There are very few times when you don’t use the pedal.

Getting Clues in the Pit

We've all heard the battle cry of the pit, "**LISTEN BACK,**" but sometimes, they need just a bit more information. Yes, the pit needs to listen back to the field musicians and adjust to what they hear. It's simple physics. But sometimes, it can get tough to hear what's going on behind you. If you've played in a pit, you know that sometimes you can only hear "snippets" of the field ensemble. Realize that the instrument you're playing, a vibraphone for example, is throwing all its sound into your face, not to mention the fact that your friend next to you is hitting the concert bass drum so hard you feel the ground shake. Here's the dilemma: the pit needs to play their instruments loud enough to be heard in the stands, but at the same time they still have to listen to what's happening behind them. Here are a few concepts that may help you through this process.

In most situations, it's best to assign a "**lead player**" in the pit. It is the lead player's job to listen back to the field musicians. Then, have as many pit players as possible listen to the lead player, rather than trying to decipher what's happening on the field. You can determine who the lead player is based on these criteria. Who has the most rhythmically active part? Most players find it easier to adjust a simple part to a more active part, rather than the opposite. What voice cuts through the easiest? Oftentimes it's easier to pick out a xylophone part or bell part, rather than a vibraphone part. Is anyone playing a time-keeping part? For example, is anyone laying down a quarter note groove on cowbell or eighth notes on a cabasa? The player with the lead part may change from phrase to phrase. Defining this should be a part of your sectional rehearsal. You may want to keep this method of ensemble playing in mind when you're writing your score!

Another concept to try is the "**chamber music**" approach. If you watch a good chamber group, you will see them cueing each other in a subtle way. For the pit, this may include subtle cues with a mallet or free hand, or breath cues. You'll find that if your pit breathes before an entrance, like a wind player, your attacks will be much more accurate. In performance, the chamber music approach works well when players are transitioning between instruments and they've lost the pulse, or for players who are in bad listening situations and simply can't hear a pulse. A good way to develop this skill is by playing unconducted percussion ensemble literature.

Sometimes (yes you heard it here first), the pit has to **watch the drum major**. This helps in situations such as tempo changes, mixed meters, or difficult listening situations (for example, when the battery percussion is not playing). As you know, if the pit plays directly with the drum major's hands, they will play ahead of the field musicians. The trick is to watch the drum major and *continue* to listen back. This will tell you how far behind the major's hands you have to play. This practice of watching is **very common in ballad-type pieces**. These are the most difficult pieces to play! There is seldom a strong sense of pulse on the field and usually quite a bit of tempo fluctuation. It may also help to **watch the feet of a marching member** for pulse. This isn't practical for all instruments. Keyboard players, for example, are facing forward.